

Narrative Writing: An Elementary Perspective

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“When a child enters your school, what is the promise that you make to the child and her parents about the writing education that she will receive?”

Lucy Calkins

Time

Writers write daily for a sustained period of time.

“If we don’t teach writing at least four days a week for at least 45 minutes, we shouldn’t bother to teach it at all.” Donald Graves

“If you’re reading everything your students write, they’re not writing enough.” Regie Routman

“Writing taught once or twice a week is just frequently enough to remind children that they can’t write, and teachers that they can’t teach.” Donald Graves

“When a school system recognizes that writing is a crucial tool for learning to read and to think across every subject area, then time for writing becomes non-negotiable.” Lucy Calkins

“In short, it is extremely inefficient to miss a day. In addition, as our data on children show, when writers write every day, they begin to compose even when they are not composing. They enter into a ‘constant state of composition.’” Donald Graves

What promise do you make about time?

Choice

Topics are mostly chosen by the writers themselves.

“Students need to be able to choose most of their writing topics if they are to take writing seriously, take pride in their work, and write with a strong voice.” Regie Routman

“By supplying a topic from my experience and giving it to my students, I indirectly taught them that their lives aren’t worth writing about, that they don’t have their own cherished bits of life.” Lucy Calkins

“The teaching of writing is not tied to topics. The teaching of writing should revolve around strategies, techniques, and understandings that aren’t connected to specific material.” Katie Wood Ray

“In the writing workshop, we don’t teach students what to write. We teach them how to write. If the content of our lessons isn’t big enough to serve students across many, many different writing topics, then it’s not good writing curriculum.” Katie Wood Ray

“When we help children know that their lives do matter, we are teaching writing.” Lucy Calkins

What promise do you make about choice?

Authenticity

Writers write for real, meaningful purposes and audiences.

“Whenever we expect students to complete tasks that do not have a meaningful context, we can expect some students to experience great difficulty.” Regie Routman

“Writers don’t improve their craft unless they have a real purpose, a real audience, and a real investment in their writing.” Mem Fox

“Purpose + choice = motivation.” Gail Boushey and Joan Moser

“When children are sharing their work, the work that is going well serves as a stimulus for the others in the class. Strong voices are contagious.” Donald Graves

“The celebration of children’s writing needs to move right up front to become a major teaching goal.” Regie Routman

What promise do you make about authenticity?

Demonstration

Teachers model for students how to think and write like writers.

“Students go a lifetime and never see another person write, much less show them how to write.” Donald Graves

“Students need to see and hear our in-the-head thinking as we change our mind, ‘mess up,’ make adjustments, do everything ‘real writers’ do.” Regie Routman

“When my teaching breaks down, it’s almost always because my demonstrations have not been sufficient.” Regie Routman

“Our greatest challenge is becoming risk takers and writers ourselves by making our own writing and thinking visible to our students.” Regie Routman

“Yet just as we would never consider taking music, art, or athletic lessons from a teacher who talked about the subject but had never actually done it, we cannot be teachers of writing until we demonstrate the craft ourselves. We must become genuine users and risk takers before we can expect the same of our students.” Regie Routman

“I try to make my thinking visible, and I let students know I have no idea how the writing will turn out.” Regie Routman

“You are in good company if writing is hard for you and you don’t know what you’re going to say till you ‘mess around’ with thinking on the page. That is how writers work. Let your students in on that secret.” Regie Routman

“You only have to write a little bit better than your students for them to take something away from your writing.” Nancy Atwell

What promise do you make about demonstration?

Response

Teacher confer with students about their writing, celebrate what they have done well, and teach the next steps for moving the writer forward.

“Good teaching is forever being on the edge of the child’s competence.” New Zealand Ministry of Education

“It is easy to get distracted and try to focus on everything. Focus first on quality content and work on editing later.” Regie Routman

“But in the classrooms of some teachers, children grow in leaps and bounds, while in the classrooms of other teachers, children make only modest gains. I am utterly convinced that the difference has everything to do with the two teachers’ abilities to confer.” Lucy Calkins

“We are teaching the writer and not the writing. Our decisions must be guided by ‘what might help this writer’ rather than ‘what might help this writing.’ If the piece of writing gets better but the writer has learned nothing that will help him or her another day on another piece, then the conference was a waste of everyone’s time.” Lucy Calkins

“Leave the writer intact is always uppermost in my mind.” Regie Routman

“Knowing their strengths helps me decide when and how hard to nudge them.” Ellen Blackburn Karelitz

What promise do you make about response?